



What's the Call?

By: Colin McIntyre – Chair, Standing Rules Committee

This month, leading into the college series and gearing up for summer leagues and the club season, I would like to give a short reminder to players, captains and coaches about the official rules resources that exist, and encourage everyone to reference these resources when sharing rules knowledge with others. I will also provide some reminders regarding the rules on physical contact in ultimate.

The primary resource is the rulebook itself, and the online version includes clarifying annotations and convenient links to cross-references. Secondary resources accessible from the Rules Resources webpage at usultimate.org/rules include the Rules FAQ and the Standing Rules Committee's 11th Edition Rules blog. Reviewing these resources is a great way to learn from some long-standing Rules Committee members who have thought carefully about a wide range of rules issues. Most rules-related questions can be answered with a reference to the rulebook or one of these secondary resources. For questions regarding situations not addressed directly in the rulebook, it is still important to identify the rules that come closest to addressing the situation as a starting point for discussion and to double-check that the situation is not already covered.



Ultimate players are obligated to avoid contact, which guides how athletes attempt to make plays and reduces the frequency and magnitude of contact. **Photo: Jolie Lang/ UltiPhotos**

I encourage players and coaches to develop the habit of citing the applicable rule when discussing or answering rules questions. Without a reference to the rules, a statement like “that is not a foul” or “that is illegal” is really just an unsupported opinion. By spending a moment to locate the relevant rule and apply the language of the rule, each of us not only reinforces our own understanding of the rule, but also provides a more reliable learning resource for others. This practice reduces the likelihood of misstatements and misunderstanding, compared to paraphrasing rules and sharing those opinions with teammates and other community members. The more players learn the rules from each other without consulting the rulebook, the more unreliable their understanding of the rules is likely to become, like a game of Telephone where a message whispered down a line of people becomes distorted as it travels away from the original source.

To learn the rules of ultimate, it is preferable to reduce the risk of that type of distortion by personally checking the original source and related official resources, rather than relying on the unsupported opinions of respected teammates and community members dubbed the local “rules guru.” For discussions of physical contact, it is particularly helpful to remind oneself to consult the rules before declaring certain behaviors legal or illegal.

Ultimate is defined as a “non-contact sport,” and Rule XVI.H states that “It is the responsibility of all players to avoid contact in every way possible.” The clarifying annotation to Rule XVI.H acknowledges that some contact will occur from time to time, but reaffirms players’ “affirmative obligation to make reasonable efforts to avoid contact.” This rule is very important in defining the level of physicality in ultimate, and it provides more guidance than the basic contact v. non-contact designation.

Much of the contact seen in basketball is precluded in ultimate by the obligation to avoid contact, including blocking or charge plays, intentional fouls, hand-checking and competing for position under the rim. Compared to soccer, ultimate allows far less shoulder-to-shoulder jockeying for position and does not permit the type of physical contact seen on most slide-tackles.

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In ultimate, there are not situations in which it is acceptable to intentionally initiate contact with an opponent. Contact will definitely occur from time to time, as a byproduct of athletes in close proximity trying to make a play on the disc. But the obligation to avoid contact guides *how* players attempt to make those plays and reduces the frequency and magnitude of that contact in ultimate, compared to other sports. Recognizing this responsibility, players should look for opportunities to make clean plays on offense and defense that involve no contact or minimal contact before, during and after the play. If it looks like a player might be able to make a play, but it will involve initiating contact with an opponent, her responsibility to avoid contact should guide her to avoid the play or attempt a different path.

One concrete example of the application of the responsibility to avoid contact is regarding the defensive tactic of “hand checking” (borrowed from basketball) which can take a range of meanings. Let me be very clear in addressing all possible meanings by saying that reaching out with a hand or arm to intentionally initiate contact with an opponent is illegal. It is the opposite of making any effort whatsoever to avoid contact.

I have witnessed different variations of this contact, from defenders who set up resting a forearm on an opponent, to defenders who reach out and push a cutter’s hip as he tries to cut, to defenders who very lightly rest a hand on an opponent while looking away and carefully avoid providing any resistance if the opponent tries to move past or through the contact. All of these examples describe illegal behavior. In some cases, an opponent may find very light contact to be acceptable and will not call a foul. In other cases, an opponent may find the contact unacceptable but will not call a foul because he does not want to interrupt his offense. But the responsibility is on the defender to play by the rules. If she believes her opponent would find light contact acceptable, then she should ask explicitly. It is never appropriate to simply assume that one’s rules infractions are acceptable to an opponent.

Finally, as folks are thinking about the rules and application of the rules in certain situations, I caution against a somewhat common rules faux pas, which is to declare one’s own personal preferences to be legal, on the grounds that “This is how high-level ultimate is played.” It is a somewhat pretentious approach to take, labeling oneself the spokesperson and expert on all that happens in “high-level” ultimate. It is also completely inappropriate to form a vigilante rules amendment, let alone one that is based on the very limited sample size of one’s own personal experience. The rules define what is legal or illegal, and invoking the behavior of a small number of players as a basis for violating the rules is misguided.

Take a few minutes to brush up on the rules before your next game. Remember that your “opponent” is actually someone just like you who wants to play by the rules, too. Use the rulebook as a valuable tool for helping players reach a common understanding, not just a means of “winning” a discussion. And remember that the better everyone knows the rules, the better the game becomes, with fewer infractions, fewer stoppages of play and quicker discussions of calls.